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Tide-water baptism

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Tide-water baptism

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

DEDICATION

For my parents José and Anita (Sanchez) Castillo; my brothers and sisters Gloria, Joe, Lucy, Juanita, Lupe, Frank, Tom, Sue, Diana, Fred; Christina, Sandra, and Paul; and my son: Eric Carbaugh.

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LA NEBRASKA

The promise of work brought my family north
crossing the never ending Texas plain in a tarp-covered truck.
Torn from a long tradition of family gatherings,
bodas, *quinceañeras* and christenings
we watched in silence
as the undulating heat made the miles of highway disappear.

My mother, feet swollen and pregnant
stood beside my father, four children pressed around her.
Other families, exchanged words of encouragement
and made *promesas* to the saints for a safe, fast trip
but there was always another town,
a few more miles.

In Colorado, long rows of barracks-like buildings
welcomed us as we stepped off the truck.
Questions of "who can work" quickly reduced our family
to tally marks on a clipboard: 4 workers, 2 babies.
Sleep eventually caught up with us as we inched our way
through food lines, blanket lines.

The first truck, bound for Montana came and went,
its quota filled, leaving behind disappointed faces
and talk of the next one, the next one will be for us.
Children laughed and played,
making friendships that could last days
if they were lucky, hours if they weren't.
Two weeks went by, another truck arrived.
Single men, couples and families (my family) boarded,

filling a wish-list from farmers in a state called Nebraska.

Nebraska, people whispered, a place where snow drifts
can get higher than a person's head
and sometimes, over the roofs of the field laborers' houses,
summers so hot, that paint on cars fade.
But that promise of work urged us north.

Easter, 1950.
We arrived on a small farm in the middle of nowhere.
Here, the air was clear and fresh like the ice cold well-water
that quenched our thirst. Scotts Bluff Monument,
a dark apparition rising from the flat prairie,
silently watched us through the cracks in our walls.

Nebraska
a good place to work and raise children my parents decide
but the others packed their belongings,
afraid of the snow and ice of winter and tornadoes
that fall out of the sky like thin black snakes from a torn gunny sack.
We promised to carry on the traditions: family gatherings, *bodas*,
quinceañeras, and christenings. No they said.
There are no *barrios* here, no corner drug stores.
No hay gente..
There is nothing but the wind that moans like the *Llorona*
looking for her children.

We watched in silence as they disappeared in the undulating heat.

THE MIGRANT WORKERS ARE BACK

From the highway I can see the smoke
coming from the chimney in elongated S's
their coffee can flower gardens form a line
beneath the kitchen window.

The dirt yard has been carefully swept and watered
to keep the dust from settling on laundry hanging
from metal clotheslines.

Mahogany-colored children laugh and play,
their skinny legs, covered in gray dirt,
that will be dutifully washed by a mother
wearing an apron with big pockets
and a house dress in multi-colored flowers.

All summer long they work, rarely looking up,
Jalando, jalando, their long-sleeved, white shirts
like pin-points of light in the emerald
sugar beet fields.

Come fall they'll gather up their mahogany-colored
children, sweep up their laughter in plastic dust
pans, and leave sagging metal clotheslines
complaining in the wind.

The dull, black eyes of the empty house will stare
at the highway awaiting their return.

SECOND GUESSING THE STORM

We watch the storm building to the west,
imitate the way Dad holds his head,
draws in a deep breath.

He says, "You can smell the rain
before you see the blue streaks
on the horizon. You can smell hail,
see the gray-green blush in the clouds,
just before the hail drops."

Like Dad, we ignore the storm,
make fast work of the rows that lead us
to the far end of the field. We listen for the signal:
a loud, high whistle and the wide-arch wave of his white hat.

Yet, when it comes we're startled, unsure of what to do.
The first fat drops of cold rain
sends us sprinting toward the pickup,
leaping over rows of fragile pinto beans,
past Momma, who refuses to run.

Dad towers over her using his hands and his arms
like a human umbrella, shielding her
from the pea-sized hail that has begun to fall.

As he starts the pickup, he pulls his hat
low over his eyes in preparation
for the cold ride home.

TORNADO

When we first see the blue line
along the horizon, we think it's smoke
rising from a fire or maybe it's blue rain
falling from the dark clouds.

We know, from the heat and humidity
of the day, that it could be a wisp of mad air,
a column of air rising, tearing bits of cloud
as it spins. We know that it might grow long
and twisted like rope that drops to the ground
then whips back and forth as if by some unseen hand.

"Tornado," Dad says, and we watch it disappear
back into the clouds as the storm moves forward
across the flat land.

We scan the horizon, see the tornado
drop, rise, then drop back to the ground,
closer now, the swirling wind picking up dust
and dark soil scoured from the newly planted fields.

Dad stands in the middle of the yard reading the clouds,
testing the wind, and the forward movement of the storm.
With no place to hide, we pile into the Ford
thinking we'll be safe, if we drive south out of is path.

In the middle of the tree-lined drive,
the explosion of an electric pole stops us,
splinters and sparks rain down on our car

that rocks softly back and forth in the wind.

The oak trees bend forward in deep respect,
allowing us to see the flashes of lightning
reflected off the sides of the silver grain silo
just before it's sent flying over the fields like a kite.
We see the cattle circling the pens, open-mouthed,
bellowing; but we hear nothing but the roar.

BODY OF WATER, BODY OF CLAY

We hit the water naked, our towels and discarded clothes
piled high like a mountain of brightly colored wild flowers
along the creek's edge.

Floating on our backs, we let the cool water
course smoothly over our slim bodies
while we watch the white clouds rising
like mountains in the sky.

We remember Dad's story of the dragon
that was turned into a mountain by a single prayer.
First, the tip of the tail and the feet
turned to stone, then up the scales of his back,
along the sharp edge of a spine so high,
snow formed on the peaks. Then finally,
down the long neck and the head, which,
when it fell, made the ground tremble.

One eye, turned up toward the sky, turned clear
then shattered like fragile glass. Cold water,
bubbling out from the stone eye, overflowed
into streams, into rivers, into the Rio Bravo,
into the Rio Grande.

We imagine Dad, hiding in the shadows,
waiting for the right time to cross. We imagine
ourselves there along the bank of our father's river,
listening to the sound of birds calling to each other.

We hesitate among shadows, waiting
for the right moment to wade silently
into the water, our dry clothes tied in bundles
balanced carefully on the top of our heads.

We imagine rain from the dragon eye
falling into the Missouri, the swift water
taking us past a thin man fishing for catfish,
drum, and gar, while a woman throws love letters
into the gray whirlpools.

The water, blending into the Platte, takes us gently
past small farms, and noisy Sandhill cranes
that startle then fill the sky like gray clouds
from a hot, summer rain storm.

In Owl Creek, we become otters, our dark bodies
spiraling silently in the clear, cool water.

We are swans, white and beautiful,
We are tiny flashes of silver light.
We are mermaids riding the waves
on the backs of dragons.
We are sirens, our song rising from the river
like thin fingers of prairie heat.

Suddenly, a shiny red pickup pausing
at the bridge, sends a drizzle of gravel
into the creek water where we hide beneath
the surface of shadow and light.

Alone once again, we bath silently,
ready to press our dark bodies
into the shadows and disappear.

MADRINA

I take Godmother's right hand gently into my own,
remember that her bones are now those of a child:
thin and fragile. I curtsy, careful to place a delicate kiss
on the tips of her fingers in one smooth motion.
Momma calls this 'respeto.'

Now seated in the living room, she and Momma
talk of roses, and the red of lion's paw
so I am free to stare at the photographs
that line the walls: photographs of babies,
of young women in wedding dresses
and graduation gowns, and photographs
of young, unsmiling soldiers.

They lean away from me, whispering,
their heads so close they almost touch
so I slide, unseen, to the edge of the couch,
examine the stiff, white doilies
that cover the tables and chairs.

Momma shifts her weight in her seat,
so I sit spine straight, my black-n-white
saddle shoes planted firmly against the other,
my hands clasped tightly on my lap.

Godmother leans toward me
and says, "I'll tell you a story about the Revolution"
and she talks of hunger and death, of soldiers,
of little boys taken to fight the war,

of women disappearing and girls taken.

I glance at the line of soldier's photographs
on the wall then stare down at my shoes,
watch the slash of sunlight moving towards me
across the brown carpet.

"Once, when the soldiers came," she says,
"mother put me in the bottom of a big wooden trunk."
I try to imagine her there, lying beneath a satin
baptismal gown, an old wedding dress, a black shawl.
I imagine her under the weight of papers
announcing a birth, announcing death,
and photographs, curled and brittle with age.

I imagine her afraid to move, afraid that the rustle
of old newspaper will give her away. I imagine her fist
pressed tightly against her thin hip, her other hand
sliding up past the silk, past the satin and lace,
to the sliver of light that shines around the trunk's lid.

"The soldiers were hungry," Godmother says
and I smell the smoke from the cast iron stove,
smell the coffee. I imagine tortillas
forming small, brown bubbles as they cook
on the black comal. I hear the beans boiling,
the roiling sound they make as they bounce
against the edge of a dented, metal pot.

I hear the soldier's voices, the sound their feet
make as they walk past the trunk.

Somebody whispers the word "mamá"
and all I can do is hold my breath.

TIDE WATER BAPTISM

My view becomes tilted as a thick strand
of my waist-length hair gets caught
in the hard, white rollers of the wringer-washer.
For one moment I can see my reflection
in the bathroom mirror: I look surprised.

As my arms flail in the air trying to stop
the roller's spinning, I recall Momma
saying that, women must cover their heads
in church, in the kitchen, and during lightening storms.
With my head suspended inches above wash water,
I add "laundry" to her list.

Tide-water is sprinkled on my forehead
as I anchor my hip against the deep, white basin
filled with diapers. I pull and pound, trying to ignore
the groan of gears and the curse
that escapes my lips on ragged breath.
I pound the roller head with my fists
until "pop," the metal jaws unlock.

Free once again, I brace my bare feet
firmly against the cold cement floor,
take a few steps back, then weave
my Tide scented hair into a long, wet braid.

I make a vow only the washing machine will hear.

RESPETO

She didn't fear age or the spider web of silver
that spun through her dark hair
like it's name-sake ore.

With silver hair she could sit
on a throne, dispense orders
with a mere wave of her hand,
dismiss youth with a side-long glance.

With silver hair more powerful
than a knight's sword. She welcomed
each passing year, eager for the day
when she could wear her age
like a royal crown of jewels.

HAIR

I.
A crimson halo of hair surrounding her head,
Momma orders us to, "finish the dishes
before I come home,"

The word "henna" is whispered throughout the kitchen
as the boys are herded into other rooms
and sworn to secrecy "or else." The baby,
the only one delighted by this catastrophe,
points and squeals noisily.

Momma's request for a hand mirror sends us scurrying
throughout the house, in search of our finest brushes,
our fanciest combs, and hands full of bobby pins.

"Your hair looks fine," we lie, "just needs a little brushing."
We surround her like an army of hairstylists
tucking each curl and pinning each wave in place
while others hide mirrors throughout the house.

We hold our breath when Dad walks into the kitchen,
stops and stares. "Your hair," he says,
"shines like a thousand suns."

II.
Gloria could be the woman in Rivera's
Mercado de Flores, the woman in red,
a basket filled with snow white calla lilies
tied to her back with a thin shawl.

Those are her eyes. It's her dark skin
stretched tight across high cheek bones.
It's as if Rivera, seeing her stroll through the mercado,
quickly sketched her image on paper,
capturing the same tilt of her head,
the sable colored hair, and her knowing smile.

III.
Lucy's hair is Connie Francis and Patsy Cline.
It's the Twist, the Mashed Potato,
It's "see you later alligator."
It's a beehive, a sweep, a bun, a roll.

It's the stuff of men's dreams and women's
nightmares but it's the perfect thing
for a rock and roll queen.

IV.
Lupe's hair is sensational.
It's beautiful yet unpredictable.
It's exquisite and awe inspiring
It's magic.
It's electric.
It's black lightening, spidering
its way through storm clouds.

V.
My hair is smooth as glass and slippery
as black ice. Bobby pins slip out without a sound.
Curls don't stand a chance.
Ribbons and hair ties disappear.

Rubber bands, slide.
Hair-combs and barrettes clatter noisily
to the ground.

At summers end, the sidewalks
are resplendent in decoration.

VI.
Juanita hates her hair. She talks of rolling
it around apple juice cans to straighten
the giant reddish-brown waves,
untamable by any other means.

She experiments with wide-toothed combs,
synthetic brushes, and multi-sized rollers.
She spends hours reading labels on bottles
of shampoo, straighteners, relaxers,
and articles from teen magazines that announce
the latest in hair styles.

Desperate, she lays her head on the ironing board,
her hair flared out like the rays of the sun.
"Do it," she says. The iron in my hand shakes
as I pass it quickly over the first big wave.
No smoke, no fire, no smell of singed hair
makes me sigh with relief, makes me lie
when she asks, "Is it working?"

THE SUMMER OF GOOD-BYES

That summer
you told me stories of Texas,
boys and "donkey school."
I told you about Nebraska winters
and showed you the arrowheads we'd
found in the fields.

Under the shade of cottonwoods
we made foot prints in gray dirt and
exchanged secrets
as we watched our brothers
play hide-and-seek in the tall, green corn.

You laughed
when you saw how I dressed for onion harvest
like a belly dancer with burlap-bag veils
waving provocatively
in eye-stinging breeze.

Home, you said, but I'll return
and waved good-by
from the cab of your dad's
old pick-up.

I waited
but you never returned.
"Pregnant,"
they said,
And I

who had never been kissed
or held a young man's hand
scattered the arrowheads

IN PEPARATION FOR A MID-WINTER'S FEAST

After the light frost has melted from the fields
we walk behind Dad's pickup noisily bouncing
the heavy, dry ears of corn against the metal sides
of the empty truck bed.

The corn, lying beneath layers of corn stalks,
husks, and thistles will soon become winter feed
for one red rooster, three geese, and a coop full
of fat, white chickens.

In late December, we'll spend days soaking
some of the corn in lye, washing it in cold water,
then feeding it slowly into a small red grinder
for Momma's special Christmas tamales.

"I can taste them already," I say, "hot and juicy,
the tender shreds of beef spiced red with chili."
We stop for a moment and take a deep breath,
watch the smoke as it rises slowly
from our chimney.

The family cat, a large Siamese male,
has followed our voices to the field.
At days end, we take turns carrying him home,
tired and heavy with field mice.

PATIENCE

Father sits at the edge of his bed praying,
his fingers sliding smoothly over each rosary bead,
each bead a prayer committed to memory

from countless mornings that begin and end
exactly the same. The prayers are a monotone
of Our Fathers, Hail Marys, and Glory Bes

that go on and on. I wait patiently at the kitchen
door, first in line to ask a question, make a request,
unimportant now as I watch the way he never slows,

never stumbles, never looses his way. I don't leave.
I don't interrupt, not even when my feet grow cold.
I just slide one foot on top of the other, waiting

quietly until he finishes. Father's eyes flutter open,
he nods, then closes his eyes again, the Hail Marys
repeating over and over again.

WITHOUT A SAFETY NET

Momma stands at the door
and waves as we begin to climb
the hill of snow formed by wind,
that erases each foot print
and hand hold we make.

Climbing to the top we disappear,
our school books tight
against our sides. We walk
single file behind Lucy
who breaks a trail through deep
snow, reaching back to offer
her hand to pull us over one snow
drift at a time, past the barn,
past the boss' house, to the dirt
road where we stop to tie
an extra knot in our scarves
before sliding down the hill.

We stop once again,
take a deep breath
then cross the bridge
like tight-rope walkers,
arms stretched out
like frozen water wings
that tip up, down, then up again
in a fragile dance.
We slide one foot
past the other, heel

to toe to heel.

We walk in the deep
tracks left in heavy
wet snow, our eyes
dart left, then right
to the creek water
moving noiselessly.

Beneath the bridge,
the pale blue ice tumbles
with unquestionable grace.

The cold wind blows,
against our back,
pushes us toward
the two-room school
the bell, ringing sharp and clear

A DREAM AFTER MOTHER'S DEATH

Outside the rain falls gently.
Lightening zigzagging across the dark sky
lights up the kitchen where a brass-handled coffin
sits in the middle of the table.

The room shrinks with each breath we take
the circle we've formed around her body
grows smaller. Our shoulders touching.

We stare at the coffin, feel the beating
of our hearts and the rise and fall of our chests.
We watch the way lightening sends our shadows
into a slow mourning dance.

White ceiling tiles rain to the ground.
Nails and window glass dissolve in the rain.
Dust falls ceiling to floor, then rises floor to ceiling.

We walk away, listening to the groan of the house
as it folds and refolds, growing smaller and smaller.

THE THINGS FATHER FORGOT

I returned late in the year, waited quietly
as he made coffee in that old silver pot.
He kept busy, wiping the table
with a damp cloth and selecting
two coffee cups from the cupboard.
Although I didn't drink coffee,
I had one that day, let him pour fresh milk
into my cup until the black coffee
turned the color of caramel.

We talked about the weather and the postcards
from Mexico he had taped to the wall.
I asked about his garden and the strings
of dark green and red chili peppers drying
in long strings that hung from nails
driven into the ceiling.

We talked about Momma, the Garcias,
the Renterias. I said, "Lyman has changed little
since the last time I was home."
I said, "My son Eric, he's tall and handsome
like his Uncle Joe, like you.

I listened as he talked about his health, knowing
that he had lost the solar eclipse of his youth.
Gone too were the rail road bridges he built
waist deep in icy water and how he crossed
the Rio Grand.

He no longer remembered why the Llorona
searched at river's edge. He'd forgotten
that a death-bed conversation with a rattler
could be avoided if the black tongue
was removed gently with a thin stick.
He'd forgotten that Death
sometimes came late at night
disguised in the feathers of an owl.

AT A CROSSROAD

Afraid to wake up from this dream,
I remain silent as I watch Momma
pour coffee into the Fire King mug
that, twenty years earlier, slipped
through Daddy's fingers and shattered
like green ice across the faded linoleum floor.

Daddy takes the steaming mug with two hands
then watches the thin curls of steam rise
and disappear into the ceiling
made of clouds.

"What should I do now," I ask. Momma smiles,
calls me Nora, and says, "Don't worry,
whatever you decide to do, you'll be fine."
Daddy can only nod because death
is like being born, and speech
is something that comes, in time.

From the glass-less windows, I watch
a long, silver escalator criss-crossing
the blue-green sky, taking people nowhere.
The only sound, a white woman weeping.

GOING HOME

I feel the hard edge of the front step
beneath my bare feet. I feel the cold door knob
and the loose paint chips as I push open
the front door with both hands.

The kitchen is empty. The table, covered
with a flowered, vinyl-over-flannel table cloth,
has been wiped clean. Daddy's pale-green
Fire King mug sits empty as the tortilla
basket, and as cold as the black *comal.*

The kitchen is silent except for the occasional
creak and pop of the house settling.
Momma used to say that late at night,
after everyone was asleep, the house
would take a deep breath and sigh.
Only she heard it as she sat embroidering
pillow cases in the kitchen, her only witness,
a clock with black hands sweeping sleep
from its pale yellow face.

One by one we grew up, left an empty chair
around the table. Daddy stopped telling stories
about dragons. He stopped talking about fields
of beets and beans, of changing weather.

Momma stopped saying "never marry a Mexican
or you'll spend your life in the fields"
while demonstrating the fine art

of making perfectly round tortillas,
the kind Mexican men love.

NOISE

Noise was like sand. It didn't disappear
but moved with the ebb and flow of children's,
laughter in beautiful green drifts.

It collected in peaks and valleys
during meal-time conversations
and formed small dunes around my feet
when my son stopped to ask if Monarch
butterflies tasted like orange slices
and could birds fly upside down.

The murmuring of his sleep were sprinkled
on pillow cases and eventually swept
under the bed with all the broken toys
and the Halloween Jack-o-lantern
he didn't want me to throw away.

Outside the grains were blown by the wind
into the far corners of the yard and into flower beds
where tiger lilies bloom in loud and vibrant colors.